

'Warts and all' – the history and folklore of warts: a review

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'Mr. Lely, I desire you would use all your skill to paint my picture truly like me and flatter me not at all. But remark all these roughnesses, pimples, warts and everything as you see me. Otherwise I will never pay a farthing for it.'

Oliver Cromwell's entreaty to Sir Peter Lely

The history of warts

The humble wart has undoubtedly been afflicting mankind for many millenia. Warts were certainly well known in ancient Greece and Rome, and the terminology we apply to warts, apart from basic Anglo-Saxon vernacular when they are resistant to treatment, has remained essentially unchanged from that employed when they were first accurately documented. The word condyloma is of Greek origin and means knuckle or knob. Myrmecia, a term we apply to painful, deep-seated plantar warts, is derived from the Greek word for anthill. The term 'verruca' was first used by Sennertus. Originally meaning a steep place or height, Sennertus applied the term to warts because 'They appear on the surface of the skin like the eminences of little hills'¹.

In Roman-Hellenistic times genital warts were referred to by the terms 'ficus' and 'thymus'². Ficus (Latin - fig) is thought initially to have been used as an obscene word. A mass of genital warts may not immediately bring to mind the picture of a fig, but cut a fig open and the granular contents are more redolent of a warty mass. Die Feigwarze (the fig wart) is the German terminology for genital warts, but in most other languages derivatives of ficus, or reference to figs, have disappeared from common usage. The Latin term thymus (Greek thymos; thymion) was derived from a comparison of the appearance of genital warts with the efflorescences of a certain species of thyme plant. The Byzantine physician Aëtius of Amida, who lived in the sixth century, when referring to genital warts stated: 'The term Thymus arises from the similarity to the tips of the plant of the same name, which grows in the mountains . . . This complaint occurs in particular around the anus and the pudenda and between the legs.'²

Aulus Cornelius Celsus, who lived during the reign of Tiberius Caesar, in discussing wart-like lesions in his classical work on medicine 'De Medicina', mentioned three types³⁻⁵: 'One kind the Greeks call acrochordon, wherein is a development of something hard and uneven under the skin, the latter retaining its natural colour. It is thin towards its extremity, but broad at its base, and of moderate size, rarely exceeding a bean in dimensions. It is seldom solitary, but commonly occurs in clusters, and principally in children. Sometimes these little tumours terminate on a sudden; but at other times they become inflamed and are removed by supuration' - this description probably refers to lesions of molluscum contagiosum. 'Another kind they call thymion - a little wart which

projects considerably from the skin, slender at the base, broad, hard, and uneven, and coloured at its summit like the blossom of the thyme, from which peculiarity it derives its name. The thymion splits up easily at the summit and is raw, and sometimes it bleeds a little; its ordinary size is that of an Egyptian bean, rarely bigger, sometimes extremely small. Sometimes it occurs singly; sometimes there are several, and both in the palms and in the soles of the feet. The worst kind are those which are developed about the organs of generation; and there they bleed more freely than elsewhere. Myrmecia is the name given to warts dwarfer and harder than the thymion. Their roots are deeper; they are more painful; they are broader at the base than at the summit; they are less disposed to bleed; and they hardly ever exceed the dimensions of a lupin in size. They are met with in the palms of the hands and the soles of the feet.' It is obvious from these descriptions that Celsus recognized common warts, a more deep-seated painful type, and genital warts.

In Hippocratic writings⁶, referring to children, warts are mentioned in the following context: 'As they grow older tonsillitis, deflections of the vertebrae of the neck, asthma, stone, infection with round worms and ascaris, pedunculated warts, priapism, scrofulous swellings in the cervical glands and other tumours are seen.'

Causation of warts

In the past, theories about the causation of warts abounded. In the *Lancet* in 1849⁷ a 'Medical News' section contains the information that: 'Dr Durr maintained, many years ago, in Hufeland's Journal, that females addicted to solitary habits often present with warts on the index and middle finger. Dr Kretschmar, to corroborate this remark, related that a girl, accustomed to search for the near laying of eggs by introducing the index finger into the cloaca of hens, had many warts on that finger.' The occurrence of warts on the digits of poultry obstetricians does not, however, appear to have become a recognized occupational disease. Another correspondent in the *British Medical Journal* in 1886⁸ asks readers: 'Has any connection been established between the existence of warts on the hands in children, and the presence of phimosis needing circumcision?' The writer then explains his query by stating that he has observed two cases in which circumcision 'for other reasons' was followed by complete resolution of hand warts. Fortunately for the juvenile male population of the time it would appear from the absence of subsequent correspondence that this observation did not excite any great interest.

Although the abundance of transference cures in folklore suggested that lay people were cognizant of

the contagious nature of warts, the concept of a transmissible agent being responsible for their causation was some time in dawning on the medical fraternity. However, in 1823 Sir Astley Cooper, writing 'On warts'⁹ stated: 'I must observe, that they frequently secrete a matter which is able to produce a similar disease in others: I have known two instances of this . . .' He then describes the accidental injury of a surgeon with a knife which had been used to remove large warts, the injured party subsequently developing warts at the site of the wound. The second case he mentions is of a woman suffering from genital warts whose husband admitted that he had a wart on the penis.

In 1891 Joseph Payne recorded the contagious nature of common warts when he described how he developed a wart under the thumb-nail one week after treating an 11-year-old boy¹⁰. The boy had numerous warts on the hands and face, and Payne, after softening the warts with salicylic and acetic acids, scraped them away with the back or handle of a scalpel, and on one occasion with his thumb-nail. Payne stated: 'Common warts . . . appear to arise by the implantation of some contagious material at one or more points of the skin, usually on exposed parts.'

In 1894 Variot¹¹ inoculated warts from a child to an adult, and shortly thereafter Jadassohn¹² confirmed the infective nature of warts by inoculation experiments. The probable viral origin of warts was suggested by the experiments of Ciuffo¹³, who, in 1907, produced warts on his hands by inoculating himself with a wart extract which had passed through a Berkefeld filter with a pore size which excluded bacteria and fungi. The presence of virus particles in warts was first demonstrated by Strauss *et al.* in 1949¹⁴, and in 1962 Melnick¹⁵ classified the wart virus in the papova virus group. With modern techniques it has been possible to identify over 30 different types of human papilloma virus responsible for viral warts.

Warts in folklore

Folklore provides a rich source of theories of the cause of warts, and suggested remedies. Lay ideas of the aetiology include repeated wetting of the hands, washing the hands in water in which eggs have been boiled (a concept popular in the North of England), the killing of a toad (the slaughterer developing as many warts as the toad has spots), masturbation ('solitary habits'), the foam of the sea-shore (Ulster), and contact with animals, particularly cows and chickens.

Remedies^{16,17}

Folk cures for warts may be categorized as follows:

- (1) Transference.
- (2) Animal, plant or mineral remedies.
- (3) Prayers and incantations - usually as a component of an elaborate ritual.
- (4) Miscellaneous - the influence of the moon, odd numbers, funerals, cross-roads, etcetera.
- (5) Any permutation or combination of the above - preferably as many permutations and combinations as possible.

Transference

Many popular cures for warts involve their transference to another person, a plant, or an inanimate object, sometimes directly, sometimes via an intermediary

object. An example of direct transference is the suggestion that rubbing the warts against a man who is the father of an illegitimate child, when done without his knowledge, speedily removes them. This presumably only applies to hand warts - any attempt to accomplish this with plantar or genital warts might well be misconstrued. In Cornwall, vagrants would undertake removal of warts by carefully counting their number, writing this on the inside of the hat and, leaving the neighbourhood, would take the warts with them. In Scotland, wart sufferers are recommended to go to a cross-roads, lift a stone and rub the warts with the dust beneath it, repeating the rhyme:

'A'm ane, the wart's twa,
The first ane it comes by
Tacks the wart awa'.'

Other suggestions include:

'Rub the warts with a cinder, and this, tied up in paper and dropped where four roads meet, will transfer the warts to whoever opens the packet.'

'If a bag containing as many small pebbles as a person has warts be tossed over the left shoulder, it will transfer the warts to whoever is unfortunate enough to pick up the bag.'

'Take a string and make an equal number of knots to the warts. Lay the string under a stone, and whoever treads on the stone will attach to himself the warts.'

Transfer of warts by sale is also quite a popular remedy, but there is no evidence that the amount paid has any bearing on the outcome. Williams¹⁸, however, provides a cautionary tale - 'A few years ago I bought a wart - not very expensively - from a sweet young thing aged five. One week later I curetted from my finger the one and only wart I have ever had. (My young girl friend - and this spoils the story - still had hers)'.

Transference to other living creatures includes the use of slugs: 'Take one of the large black snails which are to be found during summer in every hedgerow, rub it over the wart, and then hang it on a thorn. This must be done nine nights consecutively, at the end of which time the wart will completely disappear. For as the snail, exposed to such cruel treatment, will gradually wither away, so it is believed that the wart, being impregnated with its matter will slowly do the same' (South Northamptonshire). Cats, living or dead, may have therapeutic value. Try rubbing the warts with the tail of a tortoiseshell cat in May, or follow the advice of Huckleberry Finn - 'Say - what is dead cats good for Huck?' 'Good for. Cure warts with.'¹⁹

Transference to plants has its advocates, and the ash tree appears to be a particularly popular recipient. Frazer²⁰, in 'The Golden Bough' mentions: 'In Cheshire if you would be rid of warts you have only to rub them with a piece of bacon, cut a slit in the bark of an ash-tree, and slip the bacon under the bark. Soon the warts will disappear from your hand, only, however, to reappear in the shape of rough excrescences or knobs on the bark of the tree.' Or you can repeat the words 'Ashen tree, Ashen tree, Pray buy these warts of me' - then stick a pin into the tree, afterwards into the wart, and then into the tree again and leave it there.

If you can't face impaling slugs, and don't know the difference between an ash tree and a gooseberry bush,

try transference to an inanimate object - 'Take a piece of worsted and tie in it as many knots as you have warts: drop this down the lavatory. As the worsted decays, the warts will disappear' - but those who possess large numbers of warts would be as well to have a convincing story ready for the man from Dyno-Rod.

Animal, plant or mineral remedies

Think of something obnoxious or malodorous, and it has probably been used to treat warts. Suggested local applications have included fish heads, pig's blood, pig's fat, lizard's blood, menstrual blood, dog's dung, dove's dung, tobacco juice and fasting spittle²¹. Spittle must be early morning, pure and unadulterated. Bleiberg²² mentions a grade school teacher in Newark, New Jersey, who cured the warts of her pupils by advising the application of their own saliva, in the morning, before brushing their teeth. Toothpaste, she explained, killed the wart-destroying factor.

Culpeper's Complete Herbal (1652)²³ includes a number of plant remedies for warts:

Buckthorn - 'The herb bruised and applied to warts, will make them consume and waste away in a short time.'

Houseleek - 'The juice also takes away warts and corns in the hands or feet, being often bathed therewith, and the skin and leaves being laid on them afterwards.'

Celandine - 'The juice often applied to tetters, ring-worms or other suchlike spreading cankers, will quickly heal them, and rubbed often upon warts will take them away.'

The greater celandine (*Chelidonium majus*) appears to have been a very popular plant remedy for warts, being known as wartflower (Devon), wartwort (Gloucestershire and Wiltshire), wartgrass (Cumberland, Yorkshire and East Anglia), herbes aux verrues in France, and Warzenkraut in Germany. The sun spurge (*Euphorbia helioscopia*), known as wartwort in Shropshire and wart weed in Norfolk, Suffolk and Scotland, according to Gerard 'cureth all roughness of the skinne, mangines, leprie, scurfie, and running scabs, and the white scurf of the head. It taketh awaie all maner of wartes, knobs and the hard callouses . . .'²⁴. These remedies are even mentioned in standard dermatology texts of the times, such as Rayer's *Diseases of the Skin* (1835)²⁵ - 'The acrid juices of the chelidonium (sic) majus, of the euphorbia, juniperus sabina, ficus indica etcetera have been celebrated for removing warts . . .'. Palliser²⁶ documents a large number of popular plant remedies.

Even rain water, after contact with certain trees such as the black poplar, is said to have curative properties - 'The water that drops from the hollow places of this tree takes away warts, pushes, wheals, and other the like breaking-out of the body'²³. In addition to dead cats, Huckleberry Finn, in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, also waxes lyrical about 'spunk water' (rain water in a rotten tree stump) - 'You got to go by yourself to the middle of the woods, where you know there's a spunk water stump, and just as it's midnight you back up against the stump and jam your hand in and say: "Barley-corn, barley-corn, injun-meal shorts, spunk water, spunk water swallow these warts", and then walk away quick, eleven steps, with your eyes shut, and then turn around three times and walk home without speaking to anybody. Because if you speak the charm's busted.'¹⁹

A more direct, and traumatic, method of dealing with warts is said to have been the use of a certain bush-cricket (long-horned grasshopper) by Swedish peasants to bite off their warts. This insect was named *Decticus verrucivorus* by Linnaeus, the Swedish naturalist, and is also known as der Warzenbeisser - the wart-biter²⁷. It can be found in certain parts of Southern England, but I am afraid that those who might consider it a welcome addition to a wart clinic therapeutic armamentarium will be disappointed as it is now so uncommon that it has the status of an endangered species.

If animal or vegetable remedies are ineffective, try mineral, in the form of a wart-charming stone. These are usually rubbed over the wart, to the accompaniment of appropriate mumbo-jumbo, and the payment of a fee. The museum of the Royal College of General Practitioners has a wart-charming stone of gypsum crystals, previously the property of a 'witch' on the Isle of Wight²⁸.

Miscellaneous

Funerals, cross-roads, midnight, the left shoulder, and odd numbers repeatedly appear in the methodology of wart treatment folklore. In Donegal it is suggested you throw some clay from under your right foot in the path by which a funeral is going, and say 'Corpse of clay, carry my warts away'. In Kent it is said that if you wet your forefinger with saliva and rub the wart three times in the direction of a passing funeral, saying 'My wart goes with you', a cure will soon follow.

In the 17th century Sir Kenelm Digby reported an 'infallible cure' for warts, which consisted of washing the hands in moonbeams, in an otherwise empty, well-polished silver basin.

But if, after spitting toothpaste-free early morning saliva on their warts until blue in the face, slaughtering various small furry and slimy creatures, and spending long, lonely moonlit nights at the cross-roads with hands in a sodden, rotting tree stump waiting for a passing funeral, your patients' warts persist, try giving them a referral letter to the local wart clinic. They don't have to keep the appointment - the author has been told on a number of occasions 'I think I'm wasting your time doctor. As soon as the appointment arrived the warts started to go.' So maybe your local dermatologist has occult powers you never suspected.

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Forthcoming events

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Techniques & Applications of Molecular Biology: A Course for Medical Practitioners

7-10 April 1992, University of Warwick

Further details from: Dr Stephen Hicks, Department of Biological Sciences, University of Warwick, Coventry CV4 7AL (Tel: 0203 52340; Fax: 0203 523701)

Packaging of Healthcare Devices and Products

13-14 April 1992, Baltimore, USA

Further details from: Program Division, Technomic Publishing Company, Inc, 851 New Holland Avenue, Box 3535, Lancaster, PA 17604, USA (Tel: 800 233 9936; Fax: 717 295 4538)

3rd International Conference on SLE

13-15 April 1992, Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre, London

Further details from: Dr Graham Hughes or Mrs Denzil Fletcher, Rheumatology Department, St Thomas's Hospital, London SE1 7EH (Tel and Fax: 071-633 9422)

British Association of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeons: Spring Meeting

25-26 April 1992, Hospitality Inn, Glasgow

Further details from: Mr John Lowry, Honorary Secretary, British Association of Oral & Maxillofacial Surgeons, Royal College of Surgeons of England, 35/43 Lincoln's Inn Fields, London WC2A 3PN (Tel: 071 405 8074; Fax: 071 430 9997)

Reproductive Toxicology

28 April 1992, Scientific Societies Lecture Theatre, London

Further details from: Pauline A Sim, Secretariat, Gascoigne Secretarial Services, 24 Southfield Drive, Hazlemere, High Wycombe HP15 7HB (Tel: 0494 713664; Fax: 0494 714516)

Minimally Invasive Surgery

29-30 April 1992, RCOG, London

Further details from: (see entry for 28 January 1992)

International Conference on the Molecular and Clinical Genetics, Epidemiology and Clinical Characteristics of Childhood Renal Tumors

14-16 May 1992, Albuquerque, New Mexico

Further details from: University of New Mexico, Office of Continuing Medical Education, HSSB, Room 140, Box 713, Albuquerque, NM 87131-5126, USA

25th Annual Advances and Controversies in Clinical Paediatrics

14-16 May 1992, San Francisco, California

Further details from: Extended Programs in Medical Education, University of California, Room LS-105, San Francisco, CA 94143-0742, USA (Tel: 415 476 4251)

Digital Imaging Processing Applied to Orthopaedic and Dental Implants

8-13 June 1992, Portugal

Further details from: M Barbosa, Department of Metallurgy, Faculty of Engineering, University of Porto, Rua dos Bragas, 4099 Porto Codex, Portugal (Tel: 2-2009297; Fax: 2-319280)

13th International Symposium on Computer Assisted Decision Support & Database Management in Anesthesia, Intensive Care and Cardiopulmonary Medicine

10-12 June 1992, Rotterdam, The Netherlands

Further details from: Dr O Prakash, Chief, Thorax Anesthesia Thorax Centre, Dijzigt Hospital, Dr Molewaterplein 50, 3015 GD Rotterdam, The Netherlands (Tel 31-10-463 5230; Fax: 31-10-463 5240)

4th International Course on Health and Disasters Preparedness

July 1992, Brussels

Further details from: Course Co-ordinator, 4th International Course, Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters, School of Public Health (EPID 30.34), Catholic University of Louvain, 30, Clos Chapelle-aux-Champs, 1200 Brussels, Belgium (Tel: 32-2 764-33-27; Fax: 32-2 764-33-28)

XIIth International Conference on the Social Sciences and Medicine

14-18 September 1992, Peebles, UK

Further details from: Dr P J M McEwan, Glengarden, Ballaret, Aberdeenshire AB35 5UB

British Association of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeons: Autumn Meeting

2-3 October 1992, Royal College of Surgeons of England

Further details from: (see entry for 25-26 April 1992)

6th International Conference on Behçet's Disease

30 June-1 July 1993, Paris, France

Further details from: Bertrand Wechsler MD, Pitié-Salpêtrière Hospital, 47/83 Bd de L'Hopital, 75013 Paris Cedex 13, France (Tel: 45 70 26 67; Fax: 45 70 20 45)